Comments of Joanne Cantor
in Response to FCC Notice of Inquiry in the Matter of
Violent Television Programming and Its Impact on Children
September 15, 2004

I thank the FCC for their Inquiry into the matter of "Violent
Television Programming and Its Impact on Children."  Since 1974, I
have been a professor at the University of Wisconsin, focusing the
greater part of my research on the impact of media violence on
children's aggressive behaviors and their emotional health. I have
published many articles in refereed journals on this topic as well
as a parenting book, "'Mommy, I'm Scared': How TV and Movies
Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them" (Cantor,
1998) and a children's book, "Teddy's TV Troubles" (Cantor,
2004b). I was a senior researcher on the National Television
Violence Study, and I have testified several times before the U.S.
House and Senate and the FCC on these issues.

1) Effects of Violent Programming.

 Researchers know a lot about the effects of media violence.
Study after study has found that children often behave more
violently after watching media violence. The violence they engage
in ranges from trivial aggressive play to injurious behavior with
serious medical consequences.  Children also show higher levels of
hostility after viewing violence, and the effects of this
hostility range from being in a nasty mood to an increased
tendency to interpret a neutral comment or action as an attack.
In addition, children can be desensitized by media violence,
becoming less distressed by real violence and less likely to
sympathize with victims.  Finally, media violence makes children
fearful, and these effects range from a general sense that the
world is dangerous, to full-blown anxieties, nightmares, sleep
disturbances, and other trauma symptoms. (See Cantor, 2002b, for a
more thorough discussion of the media violence research findings.)

       The evidence about these effects of media violence has
accumulated over decades. Meta-analyses, which statistically
combine all the findings in a particular area, demonstrate that
there is a consensus on the negative effects of media violence.
They also show that the effects are strong -- stronger than the
well-known relationship between children's exposure to lead and
low I.Q. scores, for example.  These effects cannot be ignored as
inconclusive or inconsequential. (See Bushman & Anderson, 2001.)

       Even more alarming, recent research confirms that these
effects are long-lasting.  A study from the University of Michigan
shows that TV viewing between the ages of 6 and 10 predicts
antisocial behavior as a young adult.  In this study, both males
and females who were heavy TV-violence viewers as children were
significantly more likely to engage in serious physical aggression
and criminal behavior later in life; in addition, the heavy
violence viewers were twice as likely as the others to engage in
spousal abuse when they became adults. This analysis controlled
for other potential contributors to antisocial behavior, including
socioeconomic status and parenting practices (Huesmann et al.,
2003; see also Johnson et al., 2002).

The effects of media on fears and anxieties are also striking (Cantor, 2002a). Research shows that intensely violent images often induce anxieties that linger, interfering with both sleeping and waking activities, sometimes for years. Children's viewing of media and particularly media violence is associated with symptoms of posttraumatic stress and with sleep disorders (Singer, et al., 1998; Owens, et al., 1999). Long-term fear effects are also common consequences of exposure to violence in the news (Applied Research & Consulting, 2002; Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Smith et al., 2002). Many young adults report that frightening movie images that they saw as children (often on television) have remained on their minds in spite of their repeated attempts to get rid of them. They also report feeling intense anxieties in nonthreatening situations as a result of having been scared by a movie or television program – even though they now know that there is nothing to fear (Harrison & Cantor, 1999; Cantor, 2004a). Findings are beginning to emerge from research teams mapping the areas of the brain that are influenced by violent images, and these studies suggest that the viewing of media violence is associated with changes in brain circuitry suggesting a predisposition to reduced impulse control and the long-term storage of violent images (See Center for Successful Parenting, 2003; Matthews, 2002; Murray, 2001a, 2001b; Wang et al., 2002).

There is a broad consensus of scientific researchers that media violence exerts unhealthy effects on young viewers. One dissenting view of the issue comes from Jonathan Freedman (2002) whose book, "Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression," comes to the conclusion that the media violence research is flawed. Professor Freedman acknowledges that his review of research was funded by the Motion Picture Association of America. (See Cantor, 2002c, for a review of this book, which appeared in the Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly).

2) What Kinds of Programs are of Greatest Concern?

To answer this question, one needs to specify which effects are at issue. Certain types of violent depictions increase the risk that a viewer will behave aggressively, while other types increase the risk of anxiety and sleep disturbances. For example, aggressive acts with attractive perpetrators who are rewarded for behaving aggressively, and for which the consequences to the victim are minimized are likely to promote imitation. This type of depiction is common in cartoons and slapstick fare and in many crime dramas. In contrast, graphic violence against an attractive target is more likely to promote fear. Many movies (which are frequently shown on television) contain this type of violence. Comic violence is likely to promote imitation and desensitization, but unlikely to provoke fear. Although violence that is perceived as realistic is generally more likely than fantasy violence to produce harmful effects, children up to the age of eight are unclear on the fantasy-reality distinction. Therefore, fantasy violence can be as harmful to young children as realistic violence. (Center for Communication and Social Policy, 1998).

To give a concrete example of the difficulty of singling out depictions as more or less harmful, "Schindler's List" has appropriately been lauded as a film with an anti-violence theme, and one that is unlikely to promote aggression. However, this movie is likely to traumatize young viewers, who are not ready to assimilate such disturbing images and events.  To help maintain their children's mental health, parents need as much warning about the presence of potentially traumatizing images as they do about aggression-promoting depictions.  As another example, many people grew up enjoying classic cartoons like "Woody Woodpecker" and "The Roadrunner." Although these cartoons may appear harmless on the surface and are rarely the cause of nightmares, research shows that they often prompt imitation and promote attitudes favoring violence in young children (Center for Communication and Social Policy, 1998).

Because of the varied types of effects that different types of violent depictions have, it would seem difficult to define the types of violence that are of particular concern and thereby more subject to regulation than others.  A more reasonable approach than trying to define the types of violence that might be restricted would be to provide valid and easily accessible information to parents and other consumers so that they might make informed choices, and so that they might enforce their choices either by rules within the home or by using filtering or blocking devices that would be both easy to program and effective.

3) TV Parental Guidelines and the V-Chip

In theory, media ratings and blocking devices are the best ways to ensure that parents have the opportunity exert control over their children's access to potentially harmful programs without violating the freedom of speech rights of other people. However, research shows that we have a long way to go before parents can use these tools effectively.  Awareness of the TV rating system has declined steadily since it was introduced (Woodard, 2000). Many parents still do not understand the meanings of the TV ratings, especially those that signify violence in children's programs (Bushman & Cantor, 2003). Recent research shows not only that many parents who have V-chip-equipped sets do not know that their set contains the device, but also that the V-chip as currently configured is extremely difficult to program (see Jordan & Woodard, 2003, for the most recent data and Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2003, for the transcript of a more in-depth discussion of these issues).

4)    Possible Regulatory Solutions

In the absence of a means of defining "excessively violent programming that is harmful to children" in a consistent way that conforms to research findings and is not overly broad, it seems to me that improvements in ratings and blocking technologies would be far preferable to instituting "safe harbor" legislation.  To this end, the FCC and Congress should seek solutions with the following goals:

a) Creating or facilitating a rating system (or rating systems) that accurately denotes problematic content in a way that is easily understood by parents.  One approach would be to mandate such a universal rating system for all media.  Another approach would be to facilitate the development of multiple rating systems that would allow parents to choose whichever system they find most useful.

b) Modifying the V-chip hardware so that it can accept potential changes in the current rating system and so that it can capacitate a variety of rating systems that might be developed by independent groups.

c) Permitting blocking devices to block any type of violent content that is harmful to children.  In these days of incessant terror warnings and other traumatic news events, parents should have the option of blocking news programming, and especially breaking-news bulletins and promotional announcements for upcoming news stories.  They should also have the option of blocking advertisements for violent movies and other ads that contain violence.  This would protect children from being "ambushed" by images and materials that even the most vigilant parent would not be able to predict, without interfering with other people's "right to know."

d) Providing funding for the promotion of information that parents need to protect their children from the harms of media violence, including information about media effects and information about the meaning and use of rating systems and the use of the V-chip and other blocking technologies.  It would certainly be fair for this funding to come from license fees  or other charges to the television industry rather than from general tax dollars.

5) Conclusion

Media violence constitutes a severe health threat to our youth, and the FCC, acting in the public interest, should move to provide parents with the information and tools they need to shield their children from some of the harms that might otherwise occur in their own homes by exposure to television.  The television industry which, along with other media industries, typically denies any links to harm and opposes measures that help parents protect their children from its products (see Cantor, 2002d), should be obliged to cooperate in this effort as part of its public interest responsibilities.

These issues are important and complex, and I would be glad to provide further information or answer questions about my comments if the Members of the Commission are interested.

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